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JEWS AND MODERN THOUGHT¹.

THE holding of a Conference such as this is an indication of very striking efforts in the cause of true progress of thought. To bring together men of diverse views and of varied religious experiences upon the common platform of faith in the Supreme Being must be from any intelligent standpoint a good in itself. I have felt impelled to say this before entering upon the specific subject upon which I have been invited to speak. And if you will allow me to do so, I would observe that the inquiries which are here encouraged as to the attitude of different religionists towards the problems which beset us all are good both for the inquirers and for those who are questioned. It must have occurred to many minds who have felt the need and the power of religion that the great cause has more often been retarded by the strife of sects than by any hostility from without. The assumption common in the history of all religions, that the various schools of thought must for ever be at war with one another has had the effect of obscuring the goal of the religious life by concealing the divine truth that the brotherhood of men is the inevitable corollary of the eternal Fatherhood. Speaking of my own co-religionists, the Jews, in relation to modern thought—there is perhaps no more striking illustration of the religious backwardness, to which I have referred, than the enforced position of the Jews in relation to Christians. The compulsory isolation of the Jews through ages has been for them a severe test. I have often wondered that it has not had the effect of

¹ An address delivered at the Westbourne Park Conference at Dr. Clifford's Chapel, London, on Sunday, October 9, 1898.

destroying the religious faculty among them. What can be more conducive to the destruction of the higher religious instincts than the sense of living apart from the rest of mankind? And when there is added to this condition the baneful influence of being perpetually the victims of hatred, envy, and all uncharitableness—of discovering those around you to be your relentless enemies, it is not easy to regard all your fellow men as brethren of the same Parentage. But besides the active hostility which has kept the Jews so long isolated, and which even now in most parts of Europe consigns them to an artificial separateness, there is another evil, which is common to many denominations, of a less acute kind, but yet hindering in its effect upon general religious progress. There is the over confidence with each religious body that it alone is right—the impression that the spirit of God only hovers in a few places and not in a great many. There is also a peculiar reserve in regard to religious intercourse—and people are heard to flatter themselves when they get on with their neighbours of different beliefs on the very hard terms of maintaining a strict silence about religion. They can be friendly in ordinary intercourse, but they dare not interchange religious ideas. I have known excellent Christians ask timidly about the Jewish religion, fearing lest the mere inquiry might lead to misunderstanding. We may all rejoice that here in England, at least, Jews and Christians have come to know one another better, and, indeed, to seek and to find what they have in common.

The emancipation of the Jews, which even in England has only been effected in the generation now passing away, has had a deeper and wider influence than the mere removal of civil disabilities. The abolition of University tests, and the opening of public schools to persons of all denominations, have naturally produced an important change in the relations of Jews to their fellow countrymen. Formerly, when the Universities and schools were closed to all but Anglicans, there was not much intercourse in private life

between the followers of the different creeds. It was necessarily exceptional to find life-long personal friendships between the one and the other. Happily the condition is entirely altered.

It cannot be said that there is any particular attitude which a Jew, as a Jew, holds towards any subject, except religion. When the Jews were completely isolated, or held only slight and casual intercourse with non-Jews, the great human problems touched them as deeply as they did the rest of mankind, and there was certainly no impediment in Judaism itself to the free pursuit of science. Mathematics, astronomy, and medicine had always been favourite subjects of study among the Jews of the Middle Ages. You will read in that scholarly work of Mr. Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, p. 234, "An occupation in which Jews of the Middle Ages particularly excelled was medicine. . . The Jewish physicians of Spain and Italy were unrivalled except by the Moors. It was their scientific skill which gave Jewish Rabbi-statesmen their peculiar position at the courts of Spain and Portugal."

The modern development of science has, of course, attracted Jews in no less degree than it has other people. There is probably no department of science in which there are not Jewish students. But if you ask what is the attitude of Jews as a whole towards the modern movements in biblical criticism, science, and sociology, it is impossible to give a specific answer. The truth is that the Jews do not think together upon any of those problems, nor would it be reasonable for them to do so. There is as much diversity among the Jewish people on these questions as there is among the rest of mankind. There are Jews who are evolutionists, and there are Jews who are not. There are Jews who have accepted the latest results of biblical criticism, and who indeed have themselves in no small degree contributed to those results. There are again distinct schools of thought among Jews, or I should more properly say within the fold of Judaism, upon the inter-

pretation of Scripture. But what I want specially to emphasize is this. The faith of the Israelite is independent of the results of biblical criticism. In saying this I am quite aware that there are certain schools of thought which cannot be independent of those results. For example: where it is believed as a necessary part of the Jewish Faith that the Pentateuch is not a composite work but entirely written by Moses, there would obviously be a disturbance if it were proved that the Pentateuch was the work of many hands and of different generations. Yet this view does not stamp the Jew who holds it with apostasy or infidelity.

The remarkable latitude of thought within the Jewish fold is a theme in itself too lengthy and complex, if not irrelevant for the present occasion. It is, however, unavoidable to refer to it in addressing you upon the attitude of Jews towards modern thought. Without that latitude it would be difficult to imagine how Judaism could have survived two thousand years against every machination. It must have perished if it had not possessed within itself the power of development, adaptability—what some call evolution. Judaism has existed under every condition known to the history of mankind. First, a Theocracy—a State Religion—a Disestablished Religion—a Religion with an elaborate ritual—a Religion without it—again with forms and ceremonies, sometimes Asiatic, sometimes European. It has been a religion apparently fastened to a written code, and then we have seen it almost detached from its written code. Judaism lives on a great tradition which appears to have been partly written down and partly unwritten. Judaism has been the religion of men and women in every circumstance of life—in ghettos, and out of ghettos. Jews are aliens and pariahs in one country, free citizens in another. In poverty and in affluence, in tribulation and in prosperity, the Jewish religion has lived and has also progressed.

There has arisen in our own time a great division of

thought among persons of Jewish birth as to the very constitution of Judaism itself—and I must say at once in all candour, that notwithstanding a certain common interest, derived from the sense of a common ancestry and an inherited sympathy with the sufferings of our fellow Jews throughout the world, the division of which I speak is of considerable magnitude, and is of such a nature that it affects fundamental spiritual conceptions. I am not now referring to those differences known as between the so-called orthodox and reformers, nor to any question of mere ritual significance—all such things shrink into a subordinate place when we come to consider the larger and the deeper issue—which is a new one. I feel much diffidence in touching upon this subject, and yet it would scarcely be justifiable in an address of this nature to ignore it. There is a struggle going on among ourselves between the two ideas which are represented by the terms religion and race. Formerly, Judaism meant a certain religion imposed upon a particular people who were created for the sole purpose of receiving and maintaining it. Some of the descendants of this people to whom that religion was revealed are beginning to think that religion was not the purpose for which the Jewish people were specialized—and hence they maintain that a Jew who has discarded the Jewish religion has yet a place as a Jew in the scheme of human history, separate and distinct from the nationality to which he belongs. This struggle between two such ideas, namely, *religion* and *race*, might be illustrated by a conflict between the thoughts which are suggested by the terms *sacred* and *secular*. For purposes of distinction I will call the representatives of the two struggling ideas the *religious* and the *secular* Jew. It is not easy for me to give you an impartial presentation of the attitude of thought of the *secular* Jew—because I believe that his conception of the subject is the very antithesis of everything for which our race was called into being, and for which we have suffered martyrdom through many generations.

Of course the secular Jew, who is detached from the Jewish religion, would tell you that Jews have an outlook of their own in regard to all social and scientific questions, in the sense in which that might be said of the French or the Germans or of any nation. He would naturally think this, because the separateness of which he is undoubtedly conscious must be accounted for. Those who represent this school of thought are not numerous. They are certainly an infinitesimal section of the entire Jewish race. But they exist, and among them are individuals of wide reputation for intellectual attainments and force of character. The consequence is that whilst their views meet with little response among Jews themselves, their writings are apt to give to the outer world a mistaken conception of Jews and of Judaism. These men are sincerely attached to the Hebrew race. That attachment is easily explained. They are not removed by many generations, if even by one from those who were more than race Jews. Hence it is of the nature of a family attachment. It is probable in my judgment that such types would not exist at all, if it were not for that appalling retrogression, known as anti-Semitism, which disfigures most of the Continental States. It is the wild and cruel hatred and persecution of the Jews in Russia, in France, and in Germany, sprung up in our own generation, which has revived in the hearts of Jews, who had become agnostics, the sense that they do still belong to the oppressed and vilified race. The interest which this attitude of thought in these circumstances creates for other Jews is the reflection that the divine mandate by which the Jewish people are maintained in their distinctiveness cannot so easily be overcome as the agnostic would imagine. They are Jews in spite of themselves, and in spite of their agnosticism.

In relation to modern thought, I must say most distinctly that a Jew as such has one great message and one only. I cannot presume to speak to you as a critic or an artist. I cannot place myself even in imagination outside that

cause which is dearer than life, and with which alone the Jews as Jews in my belief must be identified. Our message is a spiritual one and it concerns mankind. If we were to forgo the purpose for which alone we exist as Jews, I for one could see no reason for maintaining the separateness. If the object of our distinctive existence is to be given up, the survival of the Jewish race would be hollow and useless.

The time has come when, in relation to modern thought, there should be established definite religious relations between Jews and non-Jews. In the present generation all the religious forces are in need of cohesion and of concerted action against the onslaughts of agnosticism and materialism. Here the Jews are capable of rendering yeoman's service. In England our Christian fellow countrymen are in very many instances working manfully and nobly for the spread of religion as the only true basis of morality and of happiness. The Nonconformists have, by their example, aroused from lethargy the latent missionary powers of the Church of England. But there are vast fields for spiritual missionary effort of which we are all more or less unmindful.

You may very naturally wonder that a Jew should speak thus to Christians, as though there were no difference between the two upon some of the most solemn aspects of the religious idea. I do not ignore that difference, but I cannot resist the reflection that Christians and Jews have in the past erred on the side of magnifying rather than of minimizing those distinctions. Above and beyond all our differences, the first clause of the Apostles' Creed is happily common to Jew and Christian alike—and what seems to me the special need of our generation is to make that fact a greater reality than we have yet done. To quote a representative English Jew: "To teach mankind a God, and to give a morality to the world, this is our calling¹."

¹ From a speech of the late Sir John Simon to his constituents at Dewsbury, 1868.

And it is clearly the profession of Christianity as well. How then can Christians and Jews unite in that great propaganda? It may seem like a dream to many, an impossibility to some, a hope to a few, that there may yet exist in England a common religious bond between all persons who are convinced that the worship of God is the only true basis of happiness and of morality. The time seems to have come when there should be a real co-operation between all who possess the gift of faith. You are perhaps thinking while I utter these words that it is impossible for Jews and Christians to unite for religious purposes so long as there remains that great divergence between us upon the distinctive teaching of Christianity. On the one side and on the other it is true that there are dogmas which appear to be irreconcilable, the one apparently the negation of the other. Notwithstanding this I venture to urge that the contrast is immeasurably greater between Religion and Atheism than it is between Judaism and Christianity. To agree to differ upon a subject which touches us profoundly is no small part of an elevated piety. It must have occurred to those who think deeply on these matters, that a high ascent of faith is reached when it is possible to feel a true spiritual bond with those who differ from us on some great issue which has rent us through the centuries. Two years ago I ventured to suggest in the *Fortnightly Review* the attitude which Jews ought to assume towards modern thought—not indeed in the sphere of science or of sociology, but in the sphere of religion only. There are multitudes of men and women in England who are neither Jews nor Christians. It has often occurred to me that there are some to whom the revelation of God will come through Christianity, and others to whom it may come from Judaism direct.

If you reflect on the marvellous variety of human character, and then consider that there is one transcendent truth which is essential for every human soul, the problem will present itself: how shall that one transcendent truth

penetrate to every individual? The experience of history and the witness of our personal lives point to the fact that the channels of divine truth are as numerous as are the types of human character. See in how many different ways the religion of the gospels has been conveyed to Englishmen alone. Each sect and almost each place of worship seems to be a separate and distinct channel of religious impetus. Among the wonders of religious history there is nothing which is more remarkable than the impression common to most religionists that the infinite Creator should have rendered himself unknowable and inaccessible to the vast majority of his creatures. Whether it be a church, a Bible or a particular tradition, to suppose that there is but one medium of divine revelation is to form a quite inadequate conception of the Supreme Being, as well as to misunderstand human nature. This criticism of course applies to Jews as well as to Christians. If you represent the religious life as something which is only attainable upon conditions which ignore the varieties of mental constitution, and which are therefore impossible for many men, you deny the universality of the religious need. I will illustrate my meaning first by a reference to Judaism and then to Christianity. In ancient Judaism the expression "God of Israel" was probably a hindrance to the universal apprehension of the divine Being. People who were not of the Hebrew family were apt to think the Israelites were not bearing witness to the God of the spirits of all flesh, but merely to a local deity. In later times the confusion which took place between abstract religious thought and ceremonialism acted as a further impediment to the dissemination of religion. It was a misfortune that Rabbinical Judaism placed its ritual aspects almost, if not quite, on a level with its spiritual teaching. Even now it is necessary to insist that the spirituality of the Jewish religion is independent of its forms and observances, and of race. In regard to Christianity it may with equal truth be assumed that the higher teachings of the gospels have

at times been obscured either by sacerdotalism or by crude interpretations of Scripture. Elaborate rituals and complicated theologies are apt to conceal the deepest truths of all religion—which are also the simplest. A great Christian has said “too much is made of the difficulties of religion, not enough of the simplicity of it” (Professor Jowett).

There are persons to whom the conception of God and of a godly life would scarcely be possible if those ideas were not clothed in the garb of a particular church—we will say the Church of Rome or the Greek Church. On the other hand there are a great many persons to whom religion and ritual, whether wisely or not, appear to be inconsistent with one another. Some people can only worship their Maker in silence or in secret and are not attracted by public worship. Others again find a certain stimulus in being part of a large congregation. There are some minds to whom the recitation of any creed is repugnant. It does not at all follow that they are unbelievers. There are types of men and women, perhaps highly cultivated, who shrink from giving any formulated utterance to their faith—who prefer to feel it and to live by it, but to say nothing. A biblical student may notice characters of this type among the authors and compilers of the Bible and of the New Testament. In the Old and the New Testament there are expressions of abstract religious thought unaccompanied by or unsuggestive of any formulated creed. And indeed they seem incapable of suggesting any. Many instances will occur to you. I will mention two or three from both sources.

In the Jewish Bible:—

“Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on thee.”

“Thou compassed my path and my lying down and art acquainted with all my ways.”

“To love mercy, to do justice, to walk humbly with thy God.”

"Hide not thyself from thine own flesh."

"Love ye the stranger."

"Be ye holy, for I the Lord your God am holy."

"My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."

And turning to the New Testament we find :—

"In my father's house are many mansions."

"Inasmuch as ye do it to the least of these ye do it unto me."

"Blessed are they who have not seen yet have believed."

"He went about doing good."

"Other sheep I have which are not of this fold."

And "Except a man receive the kingdom of God as a little child."

In regard to such sayings there are no mental difficulties. They present no problems of scientific or of historical criticism. And yet they constitute the very kernel of the religious idea from which no one with the religious instinct could possibly dissent. They seem to possess a power of uniting men which is nowhere else found with the same intensity. All those sayings, and many more like them, whether we find them in the Hebrew Bible or in the Greek Testament, are equally the sayings or the writings of Jews. They breathe the faith of the Hebrew race, and the faith which they breathe is emphatically for mankind. Humanity and not a particular race or church or group was the object of the message.

Those highest spiritual sayings of the New Testament and of the Old do not contradict one another. If the expression varies, the idea is the same. And they are the common inheritance of all. No religion can ever claim to be adapted to the needs of all men which makes itself dependent upon circumstances that create differences of opinion. Here there are no such differences. Modern thought yearns for such inspiration. The Jewish faith has entered into the life blood of Christianity, and yet Christianity

differs from Judaism. This is no paradox. It would be impossible to subtract from Christianity the elements of Judaism which it has absorbed and to find anything left that one could recognize as the religion of Jesus. One great distinction between modern thought and the thought of the ages is found in the ever increasing sense of human brotherhood as something which rises above all barriers. This sentiment was not understood in former times, except among the rare and gifted spirits who were usually persecuted for expressing it. The strides which have been made in our own generation are considerable; but if we look at the Continent of Europe we perceive an appalling contrast between the spirit which prevails and the higher spirit of the early Christians. What is needed now is to pour into the streams of modern thought the best results of religion as apprehended by Judaism and Christianity alike. For these ends Jews and non-Jews must work together—not in opposition. On each side we have to perceive that the spread of religion as the vital element of human character must never be jeopardized through a creed, or a ritual, or an interpretation of a text.

Controversy has been the bane of religious history. It has acted through many generations like a drag upon the chariot wheel of spiritual progress. We come to be weary of contention and to yearn for peace. Yet peace is not all that we need in this life. We have problems to solve, differences to adjust, grievances to remove. The struggles between capital and labour, the education of the new democracy; the duties imposed upon society towards the helpless children of criminals and drunkards—all these questions require religion to cope with them. No human problem was ever illumined by excluding the divine light. 'Unless the conscience of a people is in touch with the eternal fountain of righteousness, public morality is in danger and pessimism becomes a raging epidemic. These are the evils which modern thought has to confront. Dr. Clifford has truly said that "religion is not an opinion but a life."

Conferences based upon that principle will help to unite men in various ways. When we speak of modern thought it is necessary to remember that the vast mass of our fellow creatures do not think very much. They work and they suffer; they love and they die. Their lives are full of activity and full of tragedy, but they have not much thought of their own. They are naturally led by the thoughts of others. The consolations of religion are of unspeakable value to the toiling multitudes even as they are to the isolated thinkers. What is called modern thought is something which is suggested and determined by the few rather than by the many. Whether in science or in politics, in the arts and letters, the spirit of God is the surest guarantee for right thinking. The Jewish people, or those of them who have any attitude at all towards modern thought, must ever be mindful of the spiritual relation of their race towards mankind. To express that attitude I shall conclude with the words of my venerated father:—

“Greece taught the world the arts, philosophy, and letters; Rome the art of government, and the science of law. Our mission is higher, holier; it embraces the whole spiritual domain; it is to unfold to man all that is true, elevating, ennobling, hallowing, godlike; to link humanity with the divine essence in whose image it was created, and open up, as it were, the infinite future to our finite vision.”

OSWALD JOHN SIMON.